Lives in Dignity GRANT FACILITY Good Practices

Promoting an Integrated Development Approach to Combat Climate-Induced Displacement in Northern Pakistan

Pakistan | Duration: January 2022 - January 2025 | Implementing partners: Aga Khan Foundation Pakistan and Aga Khan Agency for Habitat, Pakistan

The Challenge

In the remote and hazard-prone Immit Valley of Gilgit-Baltistan, communities face severe and recurring risks from floods, landslides, avalanches, and glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs). These climate-induced hazards have made large areas unsafe for habitation, driving internal displacement and threatening lives, assets, and livelihoods. However, relocation efforts are complicated by limited access to safe land, deeply rooted cultural preferences for dispersed housing, and concerns about loss of identity and social cohesion.

Many community-preferred relocation sites were found to be unsafe following seismic assessments. The population's strong attachment to traditional housing and settlement patterns also posed challenges for the adoption of new designs and layouts. In this complex landscape, achieving a balance between technical safety standards and cultural acceptability proved critical yet difficult.

The Solution

The project introduced a community-centred cluster housing initiative providing durable, culturally appropriate relocation options for displaced populations. The approach prioritised community engagement, incorporating local knowledge into housing design and implementation while merging ancestral wisdom with scientific risk assessments. A total of 85 thermally comfortable, seismically resilient homes were built, incorporating Pamiri architectural features adapted for disaster risk reduction. Supporting infrastructure included water supply, sanitation, and community spaces.

A vocational training programme enabled community participation in construction, with women trained in trades like electrical work for the first time, building local capacity while challenging gender norms. The project strengthened disaster preparedness through Village Emergency Response Teams, early warning systems, and comprehensive habitat planning integrating WASH and education components.

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What Made This a Promising Practice?

The project represents an innovative, locally tailored response to the growing challenge of climate-induced displacement in mountainous, hazard-prone areas. Its participatory approach merged traditional knowledge with scientific assessment to ensure both cultural relevance and technical safety. By using a compact, planned cluster model, it addressed land scarcity challenges while preserving social bonds and enabling the provision of critical infrastructure.

The housing design successfully integrated Pamiri cultural aesthetics with resilience features, making the homes more acceptable to communities. Model homes provided early demonstration, helping to build understanding and support. The project also addressed a key gap by involving women in construction training and employment, breaking down gender barriers and strengthening sustainability.

Community ownership was reinforced through transparent engagement, and all infrastructure was planned for long-term use, with essential services like WASH and education integrated into the new settlement. The cluster housing model thus serves as a replicable solution for climate-induced displacement, especially in geographically constrained regions.

The Response

Significant challenges arose when seismic studies identified preferred sites as unsafe, leading to development of a new cluster housing model balancing cultural practices with safety through extensive consultations, though timelines weren't always sufficient to fully resolve community tensions. Initial resistance to the compact layout was mitigated through community involvement in spatial planning and shared spaces reflecting traditional arrangements, with clear communication maintaining trust. Delays in establishing schools and health facilities slowed relocation, highlighting the need for synchronized service delivery, while budget and timeline management posed ongoing challenges due to resource constraints.

Lessons Learned

The project demonstrated that integrating cultural identity into housing design is essential for acceptance, with Pamiri-inspired architecture encouraging buy-in while preserving community identity. Cluster-based relocation maintained cohesion through spatial planning considering extended families and cultural practices, while training local workers—including women—in construction trades built ownership and challenged gender norms. Timely relocation proved key, as community receptivity was highest after disaster events, requiring quick action during these windows. Planning must integrate essential services alongside housing to avoid delays, with visible progress sustaining momentum. Transparent communication builds trust, especially during adjustments, while future projects should include targeted consultation for underrepresented women and youth through dedicated community liaison teams.

Key Results

Disaster-Resilient Housing and Infrastructure:

- Constructed 71 cluster housing units and 14 dispersed houses in safe locations
- Integrated traditional Pamiri architecture with seismic and thermal safety features
- Included water supply, sanitation, and community spaces in the new settlements

Community Engagement and Design:

- Conducted extensive community consultations to align site selection and design with cultural practices
- Developed model homes to support understanding and acceptance of the new designs
- Balanced scientific assessments with indigenous knowledge to select safe and acceptable locations

Vocational Training and Local Capacity Building:

- Trained men and women in electrical work, plumbing, and masonry
- Ensured local recruitment by contractors for construction, enhancing income and quality
- Empowered women by expanding their participation in technical roles

Disaster Preparedness and Habitat Planning:

- Strengthened Village Emergency Response Teams and early warning systems
- Integrated water, sanitation, and education into habitat planning to support long-term resilience
- Promoted spatial planning that maintained extended family cohesion and cultural practices

Lives in Dignity
GRANT FACILITY

The Lives in Dignity (LiD) Grant Facility was an EU-funded initiative managed by UNOPS that promoted development-oriented approaches in forced displacement settings. With €24 million allocated between 2021–2025, the Facility supported 14 innovative, multi-stakeholder projects across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Its flexible funding model empowered local actors, strengthened partnerships, and fostered integrated programming across five key areas: livelihoods, service delivery, housing and spatial planning, protection, and disaster- and climate-related mobility. The Facility prioritized community-led solutions, localization, and social cohesion, advancing sustainable development for both displaced populations and host communities.
Find out more at https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/programming/programmes/lives-dignity-grant-facility_en

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